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ABSTRACT

A school board member describes how the use of four elements helped the board win public support for a referendum that was strongly opposed by an organized, respected committee: (1) Use of the media; rather than inviting press coverage of arguments by holding large public meetings, the board held numerous small, informative meetings. In this manner, a "school board versus the public" atmosphere was avoided. (2) Timing: mailers requesting public support were sent immediately before the election so that the opposition's arguments could be countered in the sense of having the last word. (3) Lack of reaction: the board and the pro-referendum committee maintained their determination not to be reactionary, since answering all questions and criticisms causes a loss of credibility and creates a defensive posture. (4) Board unity: the board remained cohesive in its decisions throughout the campaign, and this unity prevented the opposition from gaining an inside view or publicly manipulating a lack of full member support among board members. In addition to the successful use of these four elements, the board followed up on its stated intentions. This approach dampened hostilities and reduced conflict. (CJH)

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FACING A HOSTILE, ORGANIZED OPPOSITION

BY

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Paper presented at the Annual Joint Conference of the Illinois Association of School Boards, Illinois Association of School Administrators, and Illinois Association of School Business Officials, Chicago, IL, November 21-24, 1986.

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FACING A HOSTILE, ORGANIZED OPPOSITION

By Janet Puzey

How did we pass a referendum against a well organized, well respected, well educated opposition called the Fair Funding Committee? There are four factors which helped the pro-referendum committee and the board be successful. These are 1) Use of the media, 2) Timing 3) Determination not to be reactionary, and 4) the Unity of the Board. The wise use of these four elements helped the board and the Save Jamaica Committee convince the public to support the referendum.

First I want to describe the other side. Our opposition was called the Fair Funding Committee. This group was made up of 10 families and their supporters. Almost all of the committee were successful young farmers with school age children. These people were our neighbors, our families, and our friends. Originally they stated that their oppostion to the tax increase was solely because of the unfairness of the property tax to large landowners or farmers. They did not intend to criticize the school board or it's management, rather the tax structure used to fund schools. The focus for their displeasure soon changed.

1) Use of the media. . . Be careful in your use of the media. The opposition was anxious to confront the board in a large public forum. We wanted to avoid this at all costs. Not because we feared meeting the public, but because a forum of this type would offer free publicity for their side, plus we felt it would result in an angry shouting match between pro and anti-referendum sides providing fodder for an eager press. This was definitely the case in a previous

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referendum when a local newspaper quoted an angry citizen as saying that our former superintendent had a shoe box full of cash in his closet so the school didn't need the money. This was exactly the kind of negative publicity we had to avoid.

Fortunately our former superintendent, by board direction, had spoken to several local groups and clubs about the declining financial situation. We continued with the small meeting idea. We were very successful in informing the public and answering their questions this way. Also this avoided an actual school board versus the public atmosphere, as the board did not appear all together in public except during the regularly scheduled board meetings.

Naturally the Fair Funding group made many accusations of not bringing the information to the public, but we were able to disprove that by our record of speaking many, many times to small groups and at meetings open to the public.

The Fair Funding Committee requested an opportunity to address the Board at a regular meeting. Totally by chance we learned that they had contacted every radio and TV station, and all local newspapers so they could be at that meeting. One news source called the superintendent's office requesting directions to the school, or we would not have been prepared. Two or three phone calls were made to referendum supporters and by meeting time 100 people were present. After the Fair Funding speaker made his statement berating the Board, a former teacher made an eloquent, spontaneous rebuttal that duely appeared on the news. At no time did the Board itself respond to the opposition. Because of this we were able to equal their publicity

and turn it to our advantage as almost all present were pro-referendum people.

Another media method the opposition used were large 4' by 8' yard signs. They used school colors to urge people to vote no.. We feel this backfired for them. They placed the signs across from the entrance of the school and all along the bus routes, also in each town. When the older students saw these they were outraged. This probably influenced their parents. Unfortunately days after the signs were put up, an anonymous group set fire to them. Again they contacted the media and received air time. Although this seemed ominous for our side, most felt the publicity did them no good.

2) Timing. . . The timing of our campaign was crucial, especially the mailings. We needed to peak right before the election. The opposition fed the public a steady stream of letters to the editor, letters to district residents, signs and posters. The Save Jamaica Committee tried to ignore their strategy and concentrate on reaching the public immediately before the election. As you will see from our handout we didn't lack support from the public in sending letters to the editor. If you have no volunteers, ask people to write. It must seem to the public that there are numbers of people behing you.

Our mailers were sent on Friday to be received Saturday and again on Saturday to be received on the Monday before the Tuesday election. In this way we could counter what they had already sent out and try to have the last word. Strange as it may seem in some cases we deliberately agreed with them. They claimed that if the referendum failed and the school closed, the children would still be

educated. Yes, we said, but we can't guarantee where they will get that eduaction. They claimed that the leaking roof direly needed repair and the referendum money would not even cover this. Yes, we said, the roof needs fixing and the referendum money won't fix it, but wouldn't it be foolish to go ahead and spend the money to fix a roof not knowing if the building will be used. One additional complaint was past boards' actions that led us to this mess in the first place. After placing the blame on the worsening economic times we said yes, mistakes may have been made and wasn't it a shame that these people with all the solutions hadn't come forward at that time to offer their help.

3) Lack of reaction. . . Our determination not to be reactionary was tested time and time again. When the signs were put up, our first inclination was to start painting. The only actual response we had to this was the purchase of one billboard that said only: Save Jamaica Vote Yes, Yes, Yes.

Public behavior of board members and committee members had to be calm and polite at all times. We didn't have to become wimps but we had to avoid anything that could be used against us. Naturally we couldn't control private citizens, but we as board members could behave with forebearance at all times. And you are tested against irate, irrational citizens who in their excited state may actually spit at you.

I can tell you never to underestimate the opposition. Be prepared for viciousness and nastiness both before and after the election. Don't be naive in thinking that the opposite forces will play fair. They are not responsible to the public--you are. You

will read lies in the paper, hear lies on the radio and TV, and get them in the mail. My first instinct was to reply publicly to every one. This is a stupid reaction. Don't try to answer your critics. You may reply to all accusations privately to individuals and have your supporters do the same but do not play the reacting game. You will lose credibility. By reacting to their claims and statements you become defensive. Stay on the offense and stick to your own plan.

Avoid making negative statements. The Fair Funding group made many negative statements about the board and the school. The Save Jamaica campaign tried to say positive things. The opposition said the board is mismanaging, the buildings are not efficient, the money won't help. We said keep our school local with local control and let's give our kids a good future.

Some additional tactics and accusations of the Fair Funding group were:

1) They said they had viable alternatives to the tax hike--these turned out to be use of volunteers and taking up donations from every household.

2) They said vote yes and the board gets a blank check--this somehow implies the Board will profit as individuals. It became a joke among the 7 of us as to how we would spend our money.

3) They tried to involve local state representatives and use their names to make their points. We requested written confirmation of the representative's viewpoint and the issue was defused.

4) They appealed to the plight of farmers and senior citizens. We used a legitimate tax form to show that with the declining valuation of farm land, after the next three years farmers

would be paying the same or less taxes that they were presently paying. They sent a letter to absentee landowners urging them to tell their tenants and suppliers not to support the referendum. Once we made this public knowledge, it reflectly negatively on the Fair Funding Committee.

5) When they claimed mismanagement, we simply mentioned a very favorable audit report by a reputable local firm.

6) They presented a so-called "balanced budget" to the board and mentioned in several letters to the editor that the board had refused to accept this. We quickly got the word out that their balanced budget addressed only one fund and suggested such things as firing the LD Recource teacher and using a community volunteer to take her place. As you know this position must be filled by a certified special education teacher.

7) They went door to door with a flyer. We put in place our own door to door campaign as previously planned using individuals trained to answer questions and explain the need for a yes vote.

4) Board Unity. . . Our board was unanimous in it's decision to go for a referendum. We were unanimous in making the decision of how much to ask for. We remained cohesive throughout the campaign. This was one of the single most important factors of our success. We were accused of not fairly representing the public since the public wasn't 100% for the referendum. Not suprisingly no one offered to become the token no vote.

We learned that the Fair Funding Committee was thoroughly frustrated at their inability to "reach" the board. They couldn't attack us in public. They couldn't gain an inside view by champion-

ing one or more board members, not could they tell the public "since the whole board isn't for it, it's not really nesessary." Your chances of passing your referendum will dramatically increase if you have total board unity.

Before closing I would mention a few things about mending fences. In our small communities we had neighbor against neighbor and family versus family. Many hateful things were done and said. Nine months after the referendum, four incumbents ran for re-election. The other three candidates were active members of the Fair Funding Committee. Old issues were reheated and rehashed. When the votes were tallied, the incumbents had been overwhelmingly re-elected. This helped to put an end to the high emotions publicly displayed during and after the referendum.

Another reason the conflict died is that the Board did what we said we would do. We had made no false promises. With the new tax money we have all but eliminated the district's 460,000 debt 2 years ahead of schedule, we have increased teacher salaries and updated supplies and equipment. We levied life safety bonds for a new roof and other energy saving measures giving us a very energy efficient building. We have continued with the same high quality educational programs and conducted business as usual.

There was no big celebration after the success of the referendum, just a sigh of relief and a feeling that finally we were free to continue the business of educating the children of our district.